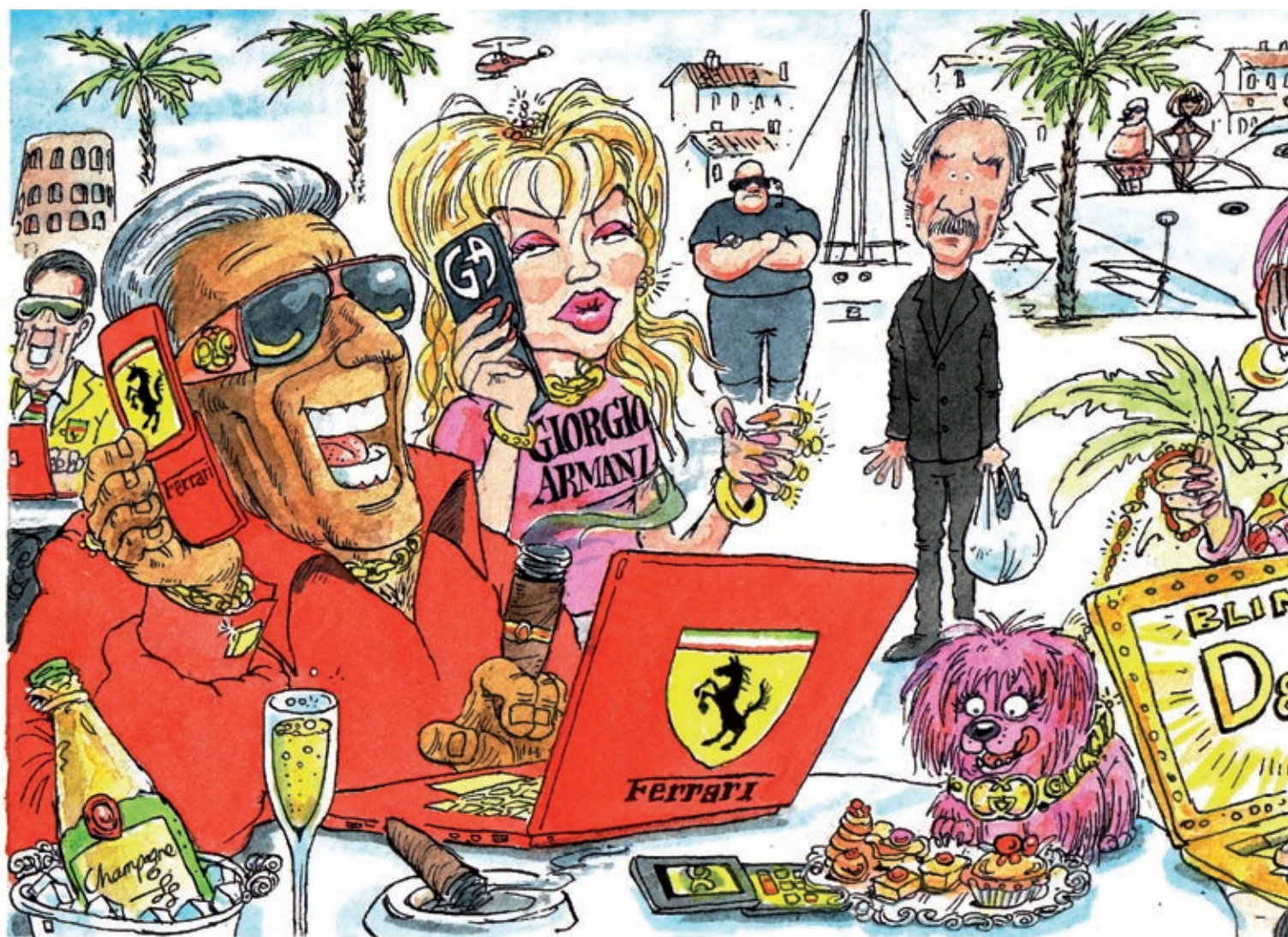




RANTS & RAVES

We're really living the high life this month – Mel Croucher rubs shoulders with the jet-set in Marbella and Simon Brew spends a glamorous Friday night at his local curry house

BRAND ON THE RUN



MEL CROUCHER RAVES

I am in Puerto Banus, visiting my favourite author to talk about her website. Puerto Banus is the sort of place where people dress their dogs in sailor suits. The promenade is lined with palm trees, exercise machines and WiFi hotspots. There's a stainless steel recycling pod for batteries, an armed guard and a man in a silver suit behind a plate glass window. The harbour is filled with luxury shipping. My companion points out James Hewitt. His hair looks unnaturally red to me. Mark Thatcher has just walked by. His hair has gone grey.

There are a great many Russian prostitutes where my author lives. They are polite, they have great cheekbones, but they are too thin to be serviceable. I meet a woman with a Gucci phone. I think her name is also Gucci, as is her dog's name. She probably calls her bloke's private parts Gucci.

Puerto Banus is the epicentre of Spanish posers. I quite like it.

LABEL OF LOVE

Back home in England, I know a graphics designer who owns an Acer laptop. It would be a modest laptop, but there's a Ferrari badge on the lid. The graphics designer pays Acer a lot to be associated with a brand name that represents extreme speed and wealth.

I watch the man in the silver suit emerge from behind his plate glass window carrying the self-same Acer Ferrari computer. The difference between him and my graphics designer is that he keeps his fake Ferrari in a real Ferrari.

The same goes for mobile phones. I spot a pale woman flaunting an amusing mobile branded 'Giorgio Armani'. I know it is not a Giorgio Armani, because Giorgio Armani makes frocks and scent. In fact, it's an ordinary Samsung phone with the name Giorgio Armani stuck on it, and in the UK it will set you back £865 over an 18-month contract. But she wears Armani, smells Armani and is damn well going to text Armani if she so chooses. Her

prepubescent daughter has her own mobile phone. It is a Prada. Prada makes handbags and shoes, but the phone says Prada, so Prada it must be. In fact it looks fabulous, as does the Armani. Which, of course, is the whole point.

Next season, mother, daughter and silver suit will have abandoned their current Armani, Prada and Ferrari in favour of whatever model is deemed to be the latest fashion. Last season, it was the Ted Baker Button phone; pink for a girl, blue for a boy. Ted Baker makes clothes, and the phone was really a Samsung G600. This year, it's free down at Carphone Warehouse.

That's what fashion is all about. The latest fashion becomes the late fashion. I applaud elegance and beauty in design, and I like the fact that people with more money than sense fund branded prototypes so the rest of us can benefit a year or so later. If it makes people happy to have a David Beckham Motorola M702iS and show it off to their friends, that's fine by me.

It was ever thus. Branded technology has been mainstream since the Mickey Mouse watch was launched at the 1933 Chicago



Exposition. That design remains a glorious icon of the times. My regret is that today's branded laptops and mobiles remain iconic only for a brief season.

I'm on the look-out for a Gordon Ramsay GastroPod. It's a bit like an iPod, but it tells you to eff off when it goes out of fashion.

THE LIFE OF BYRON



**MEL CROUCHER
RANTS**

I'm the kind of guy who likes a countess who can really count, which is why the Right Honourable Countess of Lovelace, Augusta Ada Byron, is one of my all-time favourites. I love her because she gambled her fortune away, shagged Michael Faraday and, in her spare time, sat herself down and invented computer programming.

In 1843, Ada Byron wrote down detailed procedures for using the Analytical Engine prototype computer. Not only did she understand that machines could exploit software to solve mathematical problems and execute complex calculations, but

she also suggested that computing engines could be programmed to produce complex graphics and music. In her heyday, she became known as the Enchantress of Numbers. The title of countess has never rested so appropriately on the soft shoulders of such a mathematical beauty. Until now.

Ada Byron's namesake Tanya Byron has been called upon to stick her oar in to the raging torrents that are whipped up by the dangers that computers present to vulnerable children.

Tanya Byron floated to the surface of public consciousness as the resident shrink on television shows with amusing names such as *House of Tiny Tearaways* and *Little Angels*. As far as Gordon Brown is concerned, this qualifies her as the nation's leading authority on computer games and the internet. As someone who has been in the business since Tanya Byron was nine years old, who am I to disagree?

Let's hear it from Tanya Byron herself, who proclaims: "The Prime Minister has asked me to carry out an assessment of video games and the internet. The aim of my review is to make sure you can use the internet safely, and I need your help to advise children and parents across the country." She can count on me. I'm ready, willing and able to help out. The solution is a wee bit technical, but I'm happy to pass it on for the benefit of the nation's children in general, and Doctor Byron in particular. Here goes.

BLAME THE PARENTS

When God created computer games manufacturers, producers, graphic artists, licensees, advertising agencies and vendors, he removed the parts of their brains that control reason, originality and creativity, and replaced them with the sort of black slime that poodles excrete when you feed them chocolate and liver. Luckily, when God created pocket money, he made it much lower than the price of computer games, ensuring that children could not afford to buy the products for themselves. So, if the problem is all down to slimy adults and not children, so is the solution. There is only one way that children can experience unsuitable computer and video games, and that is via computers and video consoles bought by adults.

This is where things get a bit technical. All computer platforms come equipped with parental control settings. The trick is to find these settings and then to employ a technique that we computer experts call 'using' them. Similarly,

video consoles are equipped with parental locks, and the way to stop children being exposed to unsuitable content is to 'use' them. For example, on the Nintendo Wii, where it says 'Parental Controls', the responsible adult has to select Yes. I realise this is all rather complicated, which is why so many parents leave it to their children to decide what settings to use for video games, news feeds, social networking sites and shopping channels.

Tanya Byron's report is taking six months to complete, and is costing a lot of money. I do hope she has read Note G of Ada Byron's masterwork written 165 years ago, which says that a computer "can do whatever we know how to order it to perform. It can follow analysis, but it has no power of anticipating any analytical relations or truths." That translates as "garbage in, garbage out" in modern computer parlance.

In view of this, I would like to enter the competition mentioned on the Byron Review website at www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/yoursay, where it asks for help in designing the front cover for the Byron Report. I am very excited by the prospect of winning this competition, because on the website it says, "All winning entries will be presented to the Prime Minister, and winners will be invited to London to help Doctor Byron launch the Report". My design consists of a big button with the words 'Parental Control' embossed on it. Below it is an arse labelled 'arse' and an elbow labelled 'elbow'.

CURRYING FAVOUR



**SIMON BREW
RANTS**

The first of February 2008 may seem a little distant now. However, it is a moment that should be marked, and sternly so, in the history of computing.

It was the day my local Chinese takeaway introduced its computer system. It was when the machines finally won, that the prophecies of umpteen science fiction movies came to fruition – not because the world was wiped out, but because a computer got in the way of my gut and its curry.

The beauty of my local takeaway, and I'm sure many of you enjoy the same delight, is that you ring up, ask for what you want and, if you're really lucky, they bring it to your house. It was one of the hidden bonuses when I moved into the area four years ago – although naturally I had to do a

group test of the local alternatives, which resulted in only one case of the runs. As such, it has become a safe haven from cooking on a lazy weekend.

On 1st February, a good old-fashioned beef curry and fried rice seemed a smashing idea, so I duly rang the number. The usually friendly lady at the end of the phone, though, was in a fluster. "What's the number?" she queried when I asked for a curry.

The number? What number?

She went on to explain that in future, I needed to order via the menu reference number, and couldn't use, to be blunt, 'words'. I didn't have such numbers, so carried on the old-fashioned way, which added a delay while she cross-referenced the numbers and tapped them into the computer. This, I concluded, is not progress.

OFF THE MENU

The menu, of course, has long since disappeared down the back of the drawers where it once was kept. There's more chance of me finding winning lottery numbers than uncovering it any time soon. But that wasn't my problem.

I'd collected food from this Chinese takeaway in the past, and it's not a big establishment. In fact, there's an open door that links the front of house to the kitchen, so you can watch the staff merrily pouring calories into tinfoil boxes. If I had a variance on an order in the past, they just shouted out to the kitchen. The kitchen staff were, when I checked, blessed with ears, so they listened. And all was well.

So why introduce technology into an environment such as that?

Granted, at some point in the future there'll be a big printout of the establishment's most and least popular dishes to pore over, but surely in a small business with few staff that's not too tricky to figure out? I can only conclude that the offspring of the owner is a computer whizz and convinced his parents it would be a great plan to bring technology into a place where it clearly doesn't belong, simply because he can. Soon, you won't be able to have your curry without peas in it, because – as anyone who went into a pub after computerisation in the 1980s and 1990s can tell you – there's not a button on the computer for that.

Technology is, I firmly believe, a great enabler. However, when it gets in the way of a good old-fashioned Friday night curry, serious questions must be asked. For in the constant fight between man and computer, the latter has landed what could be a killer blow. **CS**